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A FEW FACTS

ABOUT

CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL FINANCE.

BY A MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL.

Till very recently, the Liberal Party boasted they would fight the battle of the General Election on the question of Foreign Policy, and no language was too strong to denounce what they called the failure of the Treaty of Berlin, the failure of the opposition offered to the ambition of Russia, and finally the failure of the plan for improving our frontier in Central Asia. They have at length discovered that the Treaty of Berlin, far from being a failure, has proved eminently successful; that Russia has been checkmated, and is beside herself with mortification at having been checkmated; and that though we have been obliged twice to enter Afghanistan, we have successfully asserted our position as the one commanding Power in Asia. The visit of Prince Bismark to Vienna, and the defensive alliance concluded between Germany and Austria, have at length opened the eyes of the blindest Liberals to the real facts of the case. But it should be added that this situation, so fatal to Russia, and so satisfactory to the interests of this country, was deliberately contemplated and carefully prepared by the English Plenipotentiaries at the Congress.

Mortified and embarrassed by the falsification of their facts and prophecies in connection with the Foreign Policy of the Government, the Liberal Party, in desperation, are now endeavouring to shift the issue they had themselves selected, and are seeking to make the decision of the constituencies turn upon the question of Finance.

The Government will be just as ready and just as well pleased to encounter the Opposition upon questions of Finance as upon questions of Foreign Policy; and the more both these subjects are discussed, the better. No doubt it is easier for uncandid persons to juggle with figures than it is to mislead the constituencies upon facts of Foreign Policy. But, in the one case as in the other, there is no difficulty in exposing the inaccuracy of their assertions.

The accusations of the Liberal Party against their successful rivals is that Conservative Governments are more extravagant than Liberal Governments.

There is an ambiguity in the word "extravagance," which must be guarded against, if the question is to be considered with an honest desire to get at the facts, independently of Party feeling and Party interests.

"Extravagance" may mean spending more money, or it may mean spending the same amount of money, or even a less amount of money, unnecessarily and wastefully. It is not enough to enquire how much a Government has spent, in order to be able to say whether it is an extravagant Government, or the reverse. We must ask what it has spent the money upon, and what it has given us for the money it has spent. Moreover when a Government boasts that it has been economical, it is not enough merely to look at a row of figures and see how little it has spent. It is imperative also to enquire whether it has spent as much as the efficiency of the public service, and the safety and interests of the Empire, required that it should spend. It may have been penny wise and pound foolish. It may have spent where it ought to have saved, and saved where it ought to have spent.

In treating the assertion that the Government of Lord Beaconsfield has been more extravagant than the Government of Mr. Gladstone, two observations have to be made.

1st. The Conservative Government has not spent so much more than its predecessors as Liberals vaguely assert.

2nd. Though it has spent a little more, it has done so in the performance of great national and imperial duties, which it would have been cowardly, criminal, and in the end, costly and extravagant to have neglected.

The motto of Conservative Finance is, "a stitch in time saves nine." The moral of Liberal Finance is to be seen in the old story beginning, "for want of a nail, the shoe was lost." The Conservatives, sooner than that the honour and interests of the country should suffer injury, are prepared to incur the risk of acquiring unpopularity with the less patriotic portion of the community, by an expenditure somewhat in excess of that of their unpatriotically parsimonious predecessors.

It is only the simple truth to say that the smaller expenditure of the Liberals, where it was smaller, was due to calculating and unprincipled parsimony. Their object was not to save the pockets of the taxpayers, but their own seats; not to relieve the purse of the electors, so much as to retain the reins of power. Doubtless they miscalculated; and the British elector turned out to be more patriotic than the politicians who strove to divert him from his duty as an Englishman by a trumpety bribe offered to him as a taxpayer.

Conservative Financiers respect themselves and their countrymen too much to resort to so ignominious a device. The first thought of Conservative statesmen is how to protect the honour of England and defend the interests of the British Empire, and the first article of their creed is, that Englishmen are still patriotic enough not only to be willing, but to be anxious to pay whatever is necessary for the attainment of these great ends; and even if their countrymen were for a time to prefer low taxation to a high standard of national honour, that would be no reason why they should relinquish their own conception of national duty. In that case they would make way for the advocates of Retrenchment and Humiliation.

Liberal financiers and Liberal statesmen, on the other hand, begin by assuming that Englishmen love money more than anything else in the world; and they go on to flatter themselves that if they can only contrive by starving the public service at home, and truckling to arrogant Powers abroad, to present to the country a smaller Budget than their predecessors, they are sure of being retained in office.

Thus, the Conservatives prefer to forfeit power, if necessary, rather than spend less than the interests of the country require; whereas the Liberals prefer to spend less than the interests of the country require, rather than forfeit power.

But to what extent is it true that the Conservatives spend more than the Liberals? It is only true in this sense, that a Conservative Government on taking office, finds everything out of repair in consequence of the unpatriotic and self-seeking reductions of its predecessors, and has to spend an additional

amount of money in order to put the Army, the Navy, and the other Departments once more in an efficient condition.

When a Liberal Cabinet comes into office, the reverse takes place. It finds everything in a perfect state of efficiency, and then, in order to curry favour with the more unthinking portion of the population, it sets to work to render the public service inefficient again by an unscrupulous reduction of expenditure.

Which of the two systems is in the long run the most economical? Surely it is the system which does not allow things to get out of condition? Everybody knows that it is much more extravagant, and that it costs much more, to let a building get out of order and then to put it into repair, than it is to keep it in proper condition by opportune, steady, and ungrudging annual outlay.

The accusation of extravagance brought against the Conservatives is a mere election cry, and the least honest and least patriotic of all the cries employed by the Liberal Party at such periods. It simply means that the Liberals, in their desperate desire to oust their opponents, are prepared to enter upon a fresh career of wasteful and ruinous economy, and to destroy the influence and imperil the security of the Empire. Never forget what was said, almost on his death-bed, by a great Liberal Prime Minister. "By his Foreign policy," said Earl Russell, "Mr. Gladstone has tarnished the national honour, injured the national interests, and lowered the national prestige." That is rather a high price to pay for "reduced expenditure," more especially when we consider that, in the long run, it turns out out to mean increased expenditure.

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